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Abadan

The Rise and Demise of an Oil Metropolis

Kaveh Ehsani and Rasmus Christian Elling

In fall 1978, Abadan's oil refinery workers played a decisive role in the Iranian Revolution by joining the national mass strikes. Just two years later, Abadan and the adjoining port city of Khorramshahr were shelled by the invading Iraqi army and effectively destroyed during the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88), which scattered their population of over 600,000 as refugees across Iran and abroad. The bloody liberation of Khorramshahr (May 1982) turned the tide of Iraqi advances. Abadan's refinery workers remarkably kept up production under constant shelling through eight years of war and international sanctions, earning the two cities a prominent place in post-revolutionary Iran's official mythology of the "Sacred Defense."

Despite state propaganda lionizing the workers, postwar reconstruction has not been kind to either city.[1] Prior to the war, Khorramshahr had been Iran's largest port, while the much larger Abadan was home to one of the world's largest refineries. Both cities were major commercial centers in the late 1970s. A major tourist destination with posh resorts and nightclubs, cinemas and shopping centers [2], Abadan also boasted Iran's second major international airport and a large bazaar. The region's agricultural economy was booming with date plantations geared to export. Abadanis boasted of their soccer teams, leisure clubs, petroleum university, artists and prominent intellectuals.

Abadan is now a postindustrial shell of its former glory days as a beacon of modernity: a cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic and progressive city that had played decisive roles in national and global events. Today's Abadan resembles deindustrialized Detroit or Gary, the former US automobile and steel cities that fell victim to neoliberal globalization. But Abadan was also the target of military invasions, failed postwar reconstruction and ecological crises caused by global warming and human folly.

Three decades after the ceasefire with Iraq, the rubble has been largely cleared away and the population is back to the pre-revolution levels, surpassing 300,000 in Abadan and its rural surroundings (Iran's population increased from 34 to 80 million during the same period). But the city is plagued by environmental, social, demographic and economic crises. Critical air and water pollution, chronic high unemployment, widespread corruption in the public and financial sectors, ethnic and political discrimination and perceptions of state failure to deliver tangible improvements and long-term development have created a constant state of discontent. The disjuncture between official rhetoric and lived reality and the recognition that

poor policies are responsible for the crises have created a sense of abandonment and a politics of despair that regularly erupts into riots. [3]

If Abadan once epitomized cosmopolitan urban modernity, it has come to embody an opposite imaginary of dystopia underpinned by a melancholic nostalgia for a modernity that is in the past and a future that holds no promise except of further decline.

Urban Politics of Oil and Modernity

The story of Abadan is entwined with the turbulent histories of modernity in Iran, the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. From its foundation on a sandy island in the Shatt al-‘Arab River bordering Iran and Iraq on the eve of World War I, the city has been at the center of momentous events of global significance, shaped by imperialism, nation building and power struggles over oil.

Middle East oil was first discovered in 1908 in the Zagros mountains of southwest Iran. The British government became the majority shareholder in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC, today BP) in violation of the concession granted in 1901 by Mozaffar ad-Din Shah to an Australian businessman.

The decision to build a major refinery in Abadan to supply Britain’s war machine was made on the eve of World War I. While the industrial infrastructure was still being assembled, APOC attempted in vain to control and manage a growing population of migrants and refugees, as did the Iranian government in its later effort to impose control over the city. Abadan’s vast industrial workforce was made up of expatriate Europeans, Indian migrants recruited from outposts of the British Empire, dispossessed and proletarianized Bakhtiari and Arab tribesmen and Iranians coming from as far as the oil fields of the Caucasus after the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The urban politics of Abadan was thereafter shaped by relentless struggles over the right to the city—of living and working conditions and management of social and political life—between the oil company in its various permutations; [4] the autocratic central government; and the growing population developing novel forms of collective resistance and advancing its own claims and demands. Workers in the refinery, port, railways and factories were under constant surveillance and control by employers, but they found support among the general population of the city for their attempts to address social and political concerns.

These entanglements made Abadan synonymous with oil and all the violent paradoxes and revolutionary transformations associated with it. The establishment of the massive complex of oil extraction and refining in southwest Iran was based on the forcible dispossession of local tribal and agrarian populations, but it also led to the emergence of new urban solidarities among destitute migrants living in the slums of the new oil cities. This new urban geography of oil was characterized by shocking disparities of wealth despite monumental infrastructure development that spurred new models of urban management elsewhere in the country. The oil complex created tremendous pollution and ecological degradation, but this was juxtaposed to

manicured European garden-city neighborhoods, segregated social clubs and modern amenities like hospitals, schools and workers' housing estates.

Oil cities like Abadan suffered from heavy-handed corporate rule and constant police-state surveillance and repression, but they also became sites of labor activism, radical politics, and grassroots popular movements. Although highly segregated by class, race and occupation, ethnic and cultural intermingling along with the industrial labor market and urban economy created a cosmopolitan environment where new solidarities emerged to resist discrimination and injustice.[5]

By the 1960s new technologies, urban planning practices and consumer products entered Iran through Abadan, with the city giving rise to innovations in fashion, lifestyle and popular culture. Through films, newspapers and posters, the Pahlavi state produced an official image of Abadan as the epitome of Fordist development, where hardworking families could enjoy prosperity and suburban comfort in the shadow of the oil complex.

Revolution, War and the Aftermath

The image of Abadan as a vanguard city of oil-driven modernity was transformed by its role in the 1979 revolution and then shattered by the war that followed. Although the Iranian oil industry had been nominally nationalized in 1973, logistic and technical operations remained under the effective control of multinationals. In late summer and autumn of 1978, Iranian oil workers joined the popular call for a mass strike and effectively shut down operations across the sector. The strikers' main political demands were the full nationalization of the oil industry and the expulsion of all multinational oil companies and the thousands of expatriates who held key positions in technical, managerial and industrial operations. The strike dealt a fatal symbolic and economic blow to the monarchy.[6]

The city's destruction in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion and the scattering of its population were part of a major political turning point that allowed the Islamic Republic to consolidate its monopoly over post-revolution politics in Iran. Like most of Iran's war-damaged western frontier, Abadan's commercial economy and its industrial heart—the harbor, oil refinery, steel mill and petrochemical plant—were never fully rebuilt after the 1988 ceasefire, in part due to the lack of a permanent peace treaty with Iraq. The main hubs of the Iranian oil industry moved elsewhere, and the once vibrant river commerce that had sustained major ports in Khorramshahr, Abadan and Basra in Iraq is today all but moribund.[7]

Moreover, ill-conceived and poorly executed development projects, including massive dams, sugarcane agribusinesses and water transfer schemes, have caused critical water shortages and pollution throughout the Khuzestan Province. The reservoir of the Gotvand dam on the Karun river, for example, has salt deposits that have spoiled the country's largest river and main source of drinking water for Abadan, Ahvaz and Khorramshahr. In June 2018, Khuzestan's representative in the Provincial Higher Council warned of the catastrophic consequences of the province's water situation by stating that "Karun has become a flowing sewer." A Majlis representative from Bushehr warned of possible water wars, saying that "our

society is on the verge of disintegration.”[8] Significant regional environmental chemical contamination caused by three major wars has further exacerbated the situation.

The damming and indiscriminate diversion of upstream rivers by all riparian countries—Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria— has led to the catastrophic draining of the vast marshlands of southern Iraq and Iran. The resulting desertification has led to widespread displacement of populations and recurring dust storms that appear apocalyptic in scale and intensity. The critical state of air quality caused by salt, dust and harmful chemicals has caused the frequent closing of schools, offices and power plants. The poor air quality is also blamed for the rise of chronic health problems in Abadan. Global warming has further exacerbated the crisis, with temperatures rising as high as 130°F. Some climate scientists warn that average temperatures may rise to levels that make the entire Persian Gulf uninhabitable.[9]

Amidst these dire circumstances, displaced people who returned after the war to rebuild Abadan barely hang on in a dispiriting atmosphere of neglect and discontent. Even the establishment of the Arvand Free Zone, a large-scale industrial and commercial enclave aimed at reviving the moribund local economy, has failed to generate the kind of progress envisioned in official promotional material. Following the 2015 Iran nuclear accord, Petroleum Minister Bijan Namdar Zangeneh promised that the lifting of international sanctions would finally reverse the decline of Abadan and Khuzestan by ushering in new capital investments. His predictions have proven hollow, as the city and the oil rich province have continued down the spiral of decline and despair.[10]

Conflicting Imaginaries of Past and Future

To many Iranians, and particularly those in the diaspora, Abadan is remembered through nostalgic narratives that gloss over the gross inequalities, injustices and discrimination that marred the city under British influence and Pahlavi rule. In these romanticized narratives, Abadan’s past is framed as a near utopia of peaceful conviviality. Its former status as a symbol of material progress and affluence reemerges in online communities where past and current residents share pictures, postcards and memories associated with the heyday of the oil city. In this postwar “utopia lost” narrative, Abadan’s history seems to stop sometime around the revolution and the Iraqi invasion; everything later is a story of loss, displacement, repression and abandonment.

Conversely, the post-revolution state’s official narrative about Abadan begins at that historical moment: the heroic uprising of oil workers during the revolution, the epic resistance of local volunteer militias and, later, the organized forces of the Islamic Republic fighting foreign aggressors. In this official narrative, the loss of the city is a saga of the forces of good, besieged and embattled but ultimately emerging victorious from the flames of war.

Yet given the intense discontent of the local population, there are signs that the state is searching for a more constructive and mollifying narrative than its official discourse of a heroic city victimized by an unjust war. In 2016, the state opened its first Petroleum Museum, a collection of commemorative sites across Abadan’s industrial landscape including the country’s first gas station and a restored art deco masterpiece that has been turned into an

open air exhibition. The museum runs an online project to document the cultural, social and technical history of oil in Iran. Several other landmark buildings have come under national heritage protection, and the local tourist office has rebranded the city. These official projects aim to reclaim the paradoxical heritage of a turbulent past that has otherwise been kept alive by amateurs and ordinary citizens through documents, oral histories of Abadan and crowdsourced visual materials shared on social media, weblogs and other online forums.[11]

The rebranding of Abadan is part of a broader attempt to close the ideological gap between official rhetoric in the Islamic Republic and the nationalist nostalgia of a younger generation longing for a mythologized pre-revolutionary past.[12] That rebranding is a symbolic (and hardly adequate) response to Abadanis widespread sense of betrayal and abandonment regarding the failed promises of reconstruction. Abadan is, in other words, an important front in the battle of clashing public visions about the past, present and future of Iran.

In the global North, the degradations of post-industrial urban environments can provide unexpected opportunities. In Detroit, some vacant spaces have been repurposed for artist collectives and urban gardens. These grassroots initiatives may do little for legacy residents abandoned by the wholesale collapse of the industrial economy, but they do provide some green shoots of revitalization. Opportunistic politicians appropriate popular nostalgia for a lost golden era to legitimize neoliberal exploitation in the guise of righteous, resentful patriotism. Former Indiana Governor Mike Pence, for example, rode a policy of law-and-order political backlash against the impoverished, minority population in the city of Gary to the position of vice president of the United States.

But in the more precarious national environments of the global South, post-industrial urban residents and policy-makers face even greater systemic challenges, both local and international. Despite appearing to embrace a brighter version of Abadan's past, the Iranian state has yet to create substantial change in the life of the city today. Chronic unemployment, environmental crises, widespread poverty, meager economic activity and perceptions of official corruption are everyday realities for Abadanis. The government's acknowledgment in its recent cultural policies that the city's heyday was in the past has only highlighted Abadan's miserable present. At the same time, the traumatic decline of a cosmopolitan industrial city that once embodied the promises and perils of oil-fueled modernity has altered the perceptions of what collective futures can be built on a lost and idealized past. The major challenge facing the new generation of Abadanis and other Iranians is whether the nostalgic memories of Abadan's social and political past can again inspire grassroots movements and hopeful possibilities for the city as well as the nation.

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Endnotes

1 See Kaveh Ehsani, "War and Resentment: Critical Reflections on the Legacies of the Iran-Iraq War," *Middle East Critique* 26/1 (2017).

2 The nostalgia of this lost belle époque is captured in the memoirs collected and analyzed in Rasmus Christian Elling, *The Abadan Times*: <https://abadantimes.com/tag/rasmus-christian-elling/>.

3 For the latest, see "Water conditions in Khuzestan and Bushehr lead to mass protests and the closure of Abadan Petrochemical Complex," *BBC Persian*, June 23, 2018. For further analysis, see Kaveh Ehsani and Arang Keshavarzian, "The Moral Economy of the Iranian Protests," *Jacobin*, January 11, 2018: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/01/iranian-protests-revolution-rouhani-ahmadinejad>.

4 First APOC, later Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, then the consortium of multinationals that took charge after the 1953 coup d'état and finally the National Iranian Oil Company after the nationalizations of the 1970s.

5 For a history of Abadan, see Kaveh Ehsani, "Social Engineering and the Contradictions of Modernization in Khuzestan's Company Towns," *International Review of Social History* 48 (2003).

6 See Peyman Jafari, "Fluid History" and "How We Organized the Strike that Paralyzed the Shah's Regime; Firsthand Account by Iranian Oil Worker", in Petter Nore and Terisa Turner, eds., *Oil and Class Struggle* (London: Zed Press, 1980).

7 Nida Alahmad and Arang Keshavarzian, "A War on Multiple Fronts," *Middle East Report* 257 (Winter 2010).

8 *BBC Persian*, June 16, 2018 and June 27, 2018.

9 See Jeremy Pahl and Elfatih Eltahir, "Future Temperature in Southwest Asia Projected to Exceed a Threshold for Human Adaptability," *Nature Climate Change* 6 (2016) and Christoph Schär, "The Worst Heat Waves to Come," *Nature Climate Change* 6 (2016).

10 "Petroleum Minister's Promise to Develop Khuzestan Once Sanctions Are Lifted," *BBC Persian*, October 28, 2015.

11 Rasmus Christian Elling, "Abadan: Oil City Dreams and the Nostalgia for Past Futures in Iran," *Ajam Media Collective*, February 16, 2015, reprinted and updated at *Abadan:Retold* (2017): <http://www.abadan.wiki>.

12 Aghil Daghaleh and Zakia Salime, "A 'Blue' Generation and Protests in Iran," *Middle East Report Online*, January 22, 2018.